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Why they willingly complied: Ordinary people, the big environment, and the control of COVID-19 in China

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ABSTRACT

During the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese public consistently demonstrated a high level of compliance with some of the most restrictive infection control measures in the world. As a result, as of early 2022 China achieved remarkable control of a virus that had devastating effects in other parts of the world. In this article we take seriously the complexities of a simple question: Why did most urban Chinese citizens so *willingly* comply with the state's COVID-19 control measures for so long? Based on two years of ethnographic research conducted primarily in Shanghai, China between June 2020 and May 2022, we argue that the strong support the Chinese government enjoyed among China's self-described *laobaixing* ("ordinary people") in implementing its COVID-19 control measures emerged from a combination of self-interest, nationalistic pride, and "conscious indifference to transparency," rooted in ongoing critical evaluations of governmental competence. With these evaluations changing in the wake of new outbreaks in 2022, the future of China's zero-COVID policy is in jeopardy.

1. Introduction

Throughout the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese public consistently demonstrated a high level of compliance with some of the most restrictive infection control measures in the world (Wang et al., 2020). Repeated mass lockdowns shut down whole cities. Close contacts were sent to compulsory government quarantine centers for at least 14 days. Everyone in China was assigned a color-coded health pass that tracked their movements using their cell phones (Fig. 1).

In most countries, COVID policies shifted over the course of the pandemic in response to local conditions. China's approach, in contrast, has remained relatively consistent since early 2020. Even in the wake of major outbreaks in spring 2022 that resulted in a prolonged lockdown of Shanghai, China's largest city, the central government insisted it was "unwavering" (*bu dongyao*) in its "zero-COVID policy" (XinhuaNews, 2022). Apart from periodic critiques of local governments' implementations of particular control measures (Feng and Cao, 2022) – most recently manifesting in widely publicized public frustration with the severity and the inequitable nature of Shanghai's lockdown – for a period of more than two years there was very little widespread resistance to China's overall strategy.

Mass compliance with strict control measures helped China achieve unparalleled results in the control of COVID-19. While it accounted for nearly 100% of COVID cases during the first month of COVID's existence, by July 2022, China – with 18% of the world's population – cumulatively recorded just 0.38% of the world's cases and 0.23% of deaths (Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center). Although the true number of cases and deaths may differ somewhat from what has been reported, barring a colossal coverup of historic proportions, China's efforts to control COVID clearly met with considerable success.

China's restrictions certainly were not without their downsides. Excess morbidity and mortality from other causes, as well as human rights concerns, likely worsened during this period (Hao, 2022; Shepherd, 2022), and by spring 2022 the rise of the Omicron variant was raising serious questions about the sustainability of China's approach (Yuan, 2022). Still, given that China's control measures may have prevented millions of COVID deaths between 2020 and 2022, understanding how this feat was accomplished is of major public health import.

Our findings suggest that stereotypes in Western media attributing China's success to its authoritarian powers, or to Chinese people's supposedly collectivist nature or blind obedience to the state (Kupferschmidt and Cohen, 2020; Leibold, 2018) do not fully explain how a

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collective act of compliance at this scale was achieved (Mason, 2016a; Ostrom, 2009). In this article we take seriously the complexities of a simple question: why did (urban) Chinese citizens so *willingly* comply with the state’s COVID-19 control measures?

Based on two years of ethnographic research in Shanghai and online between June 2020 and May 2022, we argue that mass compliance was driven by a combination of self-interest, nationalistic pride, and trust in the competence of the central government. These factors grew out of urban Chinese citizens’ appreciation for the ways in which effective infectious disease control relies on a symbiosis between what our interlocutors called the “big environment” (*dahuanjing*) and the actions and interests of “ordinary people” (*laobaixing*). *Dahuanjing* refers both to the natural environment and to the social, political, and economic environments. *Laobaixing* refers to those who see themselves as “typical” citizens in relation to the Chinese Party-state. Popular understandings of how a healthy “big environment” benefits “ordinary people” are key to understanding Chinese compliance with COVID-19 controls.

Most of our interlocutors told us they did not feel forced into compliance by an authoritarian state. Rather, they *willingly* complied because the evidence before them strongly suggested it was in their personal interest to do so. As ethnographers we take seriously these claims of willing compliance, recognizing that even those living under an authoritarian regime are capable of evaluating and differentially responding to policies that affect their lives (Allen, 2007; Greenhalgh, 2008). Our data suggest that willing compliance depended on conscious decisions on the part of many Chinese to overlook the tendency of their government to not be completely honest with them. We refer to this as *conscious indifference to transparency*. Keenly aware of the “cooked” nature of publicly available data (Biruk, 2018), our interlocutors told us that the government’s unwillingness to share certain information did not impact their own willingness to comply with COVID control measures.

2. Methods

We utilized purposive sampling and a modified cohort design. We selected an initial sample of Shanghai residents (n = 38) that was

heterogeneous across age, occupation, and what we call “qualitative socio-economic status” (QSES). In April 2022, as this article was being revised, we added an additional seven participants – three Shanghai residents and four residents of other cities – to gain additional perspectives on the themes we explore (total n = 45). Social media and observational data complemented our interview data. Primary data collection took place June 2020–August 2021, with follow-up interviews April–May 2022. The study was approved by Brown University’s Institutional Review Board.

We created the QSES construct to capture interlocutors’ socioeconomic status as reflected in their qualitative narratives. Qualitatively assessing SES has the advantage of better reflecting its dynamic nature (Sankar et al., 2016). During interviews, the first author (Cai) collected information on interlocutors’ education, housing, employment, income, finances, and household registration (*hukou*). He then grouped interviewees into low, medium, or high QSES based on his familiarity with local social hierarchies, acquired over several years of fieldwork experience in Shanghai.

2.1. Setting

Data collection took place primarily in Shanghai. Shanghai has a diverse population with residents from across China. Four follow-up interviews were also conducted with residents of Shenzhen (2), Beijing (1) and Shenyang (1), all of which are also large cities that experienced multiple lockdowns. Data were additionally collected online through social media channels. Our findings primarily reflect the perspectives of Shanghai residents and other urban dwellers and are not necessarily representative of the full range of COVID experiences in China.

2.2. Sampling and recruitment

The authors began by reaching out to existing contacts in Shanghai through the popular social media platform WeChat to recruit a small purposive seed sample, the members of which then referred additional



Trajectory card, 行程卡



Health code, 健康码

Fig. 1. The Trajectory card shows the bearer’s travel history for the past 14 days. If the owner traveled to a place with new COVID cases, an asterisk appears next to the placename. The code contains the bearer’s health assessment (green = safe, yellow = home quarantine, red = immediate quarantine in a governmental facility), COVID test results, and immunization record. (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the Web version of this article.)

participants. Efforts were made to balance the sample across age, occupation, and QSES. Thirty-eight Shanghai residents (who had lived in Shanghai for at least one year) ages 18–61 were recruited to participate in 90-minute semi-structured interviews about their lived experiences during COVID (Bernard, 2011, p. 154). First-round interviews with these thirty-eight participants were conducted between June–August 2020. For a second round of interviews (January–February and July–August 2021), we selected a sub-sample (n = 10) of these thirty-eight who were particularly reflective about their COVID experiences over time. An additional seven participants (five women, two men) were then recruited for a third round of interviews conducted April–May 2022 (third-round interviews n = 10, including three participants from the original 38). More women than men were recruited for third-round interviews to help address a sex ratio imbalance in our original sampling (see Table 1). The sex imbalance remains a limitation of this study.

Participants were notified that the study was funded by the National Science Foundation and was being conducted by the authors to understand their lived experiences of the pandemic in Shanghai. Only one person declined to be interviewed, due to what she described as the “sensitive nature” of the topic.

Table 1
Interviewees.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Occupation	Household Registration	QSES	1st Round (n = 38)	2nd Round (n = 10)	3rd Round (n = 10)
Fly	39	Male	Sailor	Non-local	Middle	X		
LaoAn	46	Male	Barber	Non-local	Low	X	X	
Yinshan	50+	Male	SOE employee	Local	Middle	X		
Athena	18	Female	student	Non-local	High	X		
Lao Wu	57	Male	Retiree	Local	Low	X		
David	40+	Male	Investor	Local	High	X	X	
Qiu	42	Male	Restaurant Manager	Local	Low	X	X	
Yuan	59	Male	Retiree	Local	High	X	X	
CY	29	Male	Business Owner	Non-local	High	X	X	X
James	42	Male	Factory Manager	Non-local	Middle-Low	X	X	
Si	21	Female	Server	Non-local	Low	X		
Haiyang	58	Male	Retiree	Local	Low	X		
Xiaoyu	57	Male	Retiree	Non-local	Low	X		
Zheng Dian	45	Male	Self-employed	Local	Middle	X		
Wendy	29	Female	Financial Analyst	Local	High	X	X	X
Bryan	40	Male	Programmer	Local	Middle	X	X	
Deor	26	Female	Bar Owner	Non-local	High	X		
JieK	50+	Male	SOE Employee	Local	Middle	X		
Ru	22	Male	Project Manager	Local	Middle-Low	X		
Bang	57	Male	Retiree	Local	Low	X		
Yu	21	Male	Student	Non-local	Middle	X		
Kane	30	Male	Salesman	Non-local	Middle	X		
Quentin	30	Male	Consultant	Non-local	Middle	X	X	
Xiaoxiao	50	Male	Self-employed	Local	Middle	X		
Yun	60	Female	Cook	Local	Low	X		
Suke	30+	Female	NGO Staff	Local	Middle	X		
Ren	52	Female	Retiree	Local	Middle	X		
Xiao Kan	53	Male	Self-employed	Local	Low	X		
Jacky	53	Male	Health Worker	Local	Middle-Low	X		
Tianyi	60	Male	Retiree	Local	Low	X		
Yifeng	29	Male	Financial Analyst	Non-local	Middle	X		
Field	24	Female	Teacher	Non-local	Middle	X		
Xiao Man	20+	Male	Student	Non-local	High	X		
Persona	29	Male	Office Worker	Local	Middle	X		
Moji	20+	Male	Social media	Non-local	Middle	X		
Bobbi	30	Female	College Admin	Non-local	Middle	X		
Lisa	28	Female	Manager	Local	Middle	X	X	X
Amanda	29	Female	Investor	Local	High	X		
Fiona	29	Female	HR	Shenzhen	Middle			X
Chon	35	Male	Garage Manager	Shenyang	Middle-low			X
Janet	30	Female	Product developer	Shenzhen	Middle			X
Zhou	33	Female	Restaurant Owner	Local	Middle-Low			X
Dongwen	40	Female	Freelancer	Local	Middle			X
Jessie	30	Female	Professor	Beijing	High			X
Nick	40	Male	Business Owner	Local	High			X

2.3. Interviews

The first author, Cai, is a Chinese national, and, from 2019 to 21, was a Shanghai resident. He conducted all interviews in Mandarin Chinese. As a Chinese citizen who lived through much of Shanghai’s COVID response but who had a non-Shanghai household registration and an overseas education, Cai was both an insider and outsider to interviewees.

Twenty-eight first-round interviews were conducted in a café in Huangpu District, Shanghai; ten were conducted by phone. Second-round and third-round interviews were conducted by phone. We solicited information on a variety of topics related to interviewees’ knowledge consumption, behaviors, and attitudes. Oral consent was obtained at the beginning of each interview. Interviewees received 150 RMB (~23 USD) in compensation.

Interviews were semi-structured. Cai asked consistent questions in each interview as initial probes and then encouraged interviewees to freely discuss COVID-related matters. Probes included: What do you think about the government’s control measures? How does China’s response compare with other countries? Where do you get your information about COVID-19? Interviews were recorded.

2.4. Observational data

To observe responses to control measures over time, the first author conducted participant observation by travelling to different parts of Shanghai daily during the primary data collection period (June 2020–August 2021). Areas visited covered all major urban areas of Shanghai. Because Shanghai resumed public activities in March 2020, Cai was able to observe venues including gyms, malls, parks, and so on. He wrote field notes about control measures and observed behaviors over the course of the study.

2.5. Social media

Social media was a major source of (dis)information about COVID-19 and a place where many people recorded their reactions to the pandemic. Adopting the “walk-through method” (Light et al., 2018), we drew upon the same social media platforms that our interlocutors identified as important and used these platforms the ways they did, to identify and collect content (including articles/posts/images/comments) related to COVID-19. Social media data were collected daily from January–March 2020 on WeChat, the most popular platform in China, and periodically thereafter whenever major events (eg. new outbreaks) occurred. We analyzed posts’ structure, genre, and format, to examine publicly expressed reactions to pandemic control measures. Only publicly available content was collected. Over 50 online articles and 100+ screenshots of social media posts/images/comments were collected and contribute to our overall analysis. We triangulated social media data with observations and interviews to develop a detailed picture of urban Chinese residents’ lived experiences of COVID.

Particularly during lockdowns, social media platforms were our interlocutors’ main sources of information about COVID-19, and significantly shaped people’s perceptions of the pandemic and behavioral responses (Lathifah et al., 2021). It is important to note that Chinese social media is not simply a channel for state-controlled propaganda. When collecting social media data, we observed creative ways in which people used pictures, euphemisms, or VPNs to counteract censorship efforts, and they frequently posted opinions that contradicted official statements. Still, our interlocutors knew that information they accessed through social media was heavily mediated by both political and market forces.

2.6. Analysis

Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim by a China-based transcribing service. Two research assistants with native fluency in Chinese reviewed the transcripts for accuracy. Material from the primary data collection period (June 2020–August 2021), including interview transcripts, field notes, images, and online articles, was imported into NVivo (v.13) for coding. The first author generated a codebook, which the second author revised. An RA then conducted a first round of coding. Relevant responses from all interviews were extracted and reviewed to identify broad themes. A second round of coding was conducted by the RA to identify sub-themes under the broad theme of “compliance” (see Table 2). Responses were sorted by participant to examine chronological changes and consistencies over time. Data from interviews, observations, and social media were triangulated to produce as nuanced a representation as possible of common ideas and behaviors.

3. *Laobaixing* and *dahuanjing*

In the 1950s, ‘60s and ‘70s, “the people” (*renmin*) were the heroes and *raison d’être* of Mao Zedong’s Communist project. “*Renmin*” evoked a cohesive, noble collective of the poor that was both entitled to the Party-state’s care and uniquely well-suited to serve it (Lee, 2014; Mason, 2016a). In her ethnography of laid-off workers in Northeast China, Cho

Table 2

Secondary codes under “compliance”.

Personal safety
Family safety
Collective safety
Trust in government
Citizen responsibility
Critiques of freedom
Public shaming
Government achievements
Forced compliance
Perceived risk
Convenience
Economic considerations
Historical origins of compliance
Peer influence
Surveillance

(2013) argues that by the turn of the century, the association of China’s poor with the heroic *renmin* was being replaced by their association with a maligned “population” (*renkou*). *Renkou* was portrayed as a burden on the Party-state, and was set apart from the educated middle-class, who were increasingly valued as emblems of a new, prosperous China (Mason, 2016a).

More recently, social scientists have noted increasing use of the term “*laobaixing*” to describe the Chinese populace (Fan, 2015; Gibbs, 2018; Tilt, 2013). Among our interlocutors, *laobaixing* functioned as a gloss for both those formerly associated with *renmin* and for China’s rising middle and upper classes. It was a term that imagined a reconstituted cohesion among Chinese citizens – an inclusive “imagined community” of all those ruled by the Party-state (Anderson, 2006).

Like “the people” of the past, *laobaixing*, as used by our interlocutors, indexes a valued, cohesive collective. Unlike “the people,” *laobaixing* is separate from the Party-state and is not associated with a particular social class. It is a category that attempts to bring together different levels of China’s highly stratified society. David, a 40-year-old father with degrees from prestigious American universities, explained *laobaixing* this way: “So long as one is on the receiving end of the policies, then it’s the same kind of people. Don’t assume that you [someone with money and education] are any different than others.” Janet, a 30-year-old product developer, defined *laobaixing* as “the common population relative to the governing power, which is the Party.” Chinese President Xi Jinping similarly framed *laobaixing* in a 2019 speech as all those whom the Party-state is charged with serving, declaring, “The obligation of the Party is to serve the *laobaixing* and to make them happy” (Li, 2022, p. 19). In this rendering, citizens who were Party members, and thus part of the state, were not *laobaixing*. Everyone else was. Most of those we interviewed and whose experiences we documented on social media explicitly categorized themselves as *laobaixing*. Following our interlocutors’ lead, we thus use the emic term *laobaixing* throughout this article to refer to our interlocutors and to others our interlocutors considered to fall into this category – that is, Chinese citizens of any socioeconomic status who were not affiliated with the state (Agar, 2011). (Our interlocutors included both rural and urban Chinese in the category of *laobaixing*; the limitations of our data, however, mean that our observations primarily pertain to urban residents).

Our findings suggest that for the first two years of the pandemic in China, *laobaixing* residing in urban areas displayed a high level of homogeneity in their attitudes toward the state’s COVID response. Of course, this apparent homogeneity glosses over the vastly different costs and consequences of COVID for individuals and families of different economic means, social positioning, and geographical residence. In taking seriously our interlocutors’ self-identification as “*laobaixing*” in our analysis, we focus on how and why people from different backgrounds nevertheless found collective purpose in the face of COVID, how they grounded this purpose in their identity as *laobaixing*, and how this identity influenced their reactions to state policies.

Dahuanjing (“big environment”) was another term that frequently appeared in both our interview and social media data. In the context of COVID-19, *dahuanjing* referred to local and national public health conditions, as well as to the broader social, economic, and political conditions that shaped individual lives. Our interlocutors continually and critically evaluated *dahuanjing* and its impact on *laobaixing*. They conducted careful cost-benefit analyses to determine what actions were necessary to protect their own best interests within the big environment. These cost-benefit analyses, which we describe below, are key to understanding how willing compliance at massive scale was achieved – and why that compliance may now (as of July 2022) be in jeopardy.

4. Findings

4.1. Self-interest

4.1.1. Fear of death

Compliance with China’s COVID response throughout the study period was strongly tied to visceral fear associated with COVID’s initial appearance in Wuhan. In January 2020, the central Chinese government instituted a nationwide lockdown to curb the spread of the new virus. The country was almost entirely sealed off for over two months. Public health workers went door to door, taking residents’ temperatures and moving those with a fever to government-run quarantine facilities. Guards were stationed at the gates of apartment complexes, keeping outsiders out and residents in (Xu et al., 2020). By March 2020, the domestic outbreak had been brought under control.

Having seen images of bodies in hospital hallways and grieving family members on social media, our participants needed little convincing to participate in control measures that they considered essential for their own self-preservation. Indeed, residential communities and local citizens often were the ones to organize and enforce lockdown measures. In Shanghai, each household in gated residential communities was issued one exit card (*churuzheng*), allowing one person to leave daily to purchase food. Most residents didn’t even use this card, instead opting for online ordering. Those few who didn’t comply were reprimanded by neighborhood committee members and, occasionally, arrested by police. Video footage of these individuals was shared on social media, and they were publicly shamed.

Trapped indoors, hundreds of millions of people had nothing to do but browse social media and watch news. Messages of fear and danger were relayed early and often, and sensational images and videos out of Wuhan’s overwhelmed hospitals went viral. The impression for most *laobaixing* in these early months – an impression borne out by high fatality rates in Wuhan and later in places like Italy, Ecuador, and the US – was that COVID equaled death (Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center). Consequently, the primary reason most were willing to comply with even the strictest control measures was fear of death if they failed to do so. That fear created an emotional link between compliance and self-interest that lasted long after the initial lockdowns ended and was continually reinforced by gruesome scenes emerging from countries where control measures were looser.

For Bryan, a computer programmer in his thirties, the need for compliance was self-evident. In response to an interview question about why he complied, Bryan replied:

“Fear. ... we don’t want our family or ourselves to contract it. This is just normal. ...

You pay for your own choice. We all do, eventually. You can choose not to wear a mask. But it will eventually lead to a large-scale outbreak and quick transmission, and then millions will die. Can you really stay out of all this in *dahuanjing*? Can you ensure that you won’t be infected, that your most personal interests won’t be impaired? Your purpose of taking other people’s interests into consideration is to benefit yourself in the end. Eventually this is

about taking care of ourselves. It’s not about grand ideological beliefs.”

For Bryan, complying with large-scale control measures in the context of a dangerous *dahuanjing* was a matter of self-protection. One had to care about protecting others because protecting others was necessary to protect oneself and one’s family. Failing to comply would eventually result in personal harm. In making this argument, Bryan rejected the idea that there may be a tradeoff between public health goals and individual interests. In Bryan’s estimation, no individual was safe when *dahuanjing* was so dangerous. Therefore, protecting oneself required taking measures to improve *dahuanjing*. “Grand ideological beliefs” were not necessary to motivate *laobaixing* to cooperate.

China’s successful containment of the SARS epidemic two decades earlier – also achieved through harsh control measures – provided further evidence that the government’s efforts were necessary and effective. Shanghai was one of the cities hit hardest by SARS, a coronavirus that killed 800 people in 2003, mostly in China, and caused widespread financial disruption. SARS left a lingering fear of flu-like epidemics and spurred fundamental changes to China’s public health system (Mason, 2016a). Some older interlocutors explicitly compared the two outbreaks when explaining their confidence that the government knew what it was doing and that control measures would protect them.

Yun, a 60-year-old cook, explained: “I think we handle epidemics better and better each time. Compared with our reactions during SARS, we do it way better this time. For example, for people who were home-quarantined ... volunteers would deliver meals to your door and even take out your trash.” For people who went through both SARS and COVID-19, the progress made in the intervening years was palpable. The Chinese state appeared to them to be a responsible caretaker that learned from previous experience to do its job more effectively. To fail to support the state was to fail to support this progress.

Even those who experienced substantive harms from COVID control measures made similar assertions. When Cai interviewed him in the summer of 2020, LaoAn was a 46-year-old barber whose barbershop closed for four months early in the outbreak. He could not afford his rent and had to move in with a friend. Even after the barbershop resumed operations, business was only half what it was before the lockdown. Still, LaoAn expressed strong support for China’s strict measures. The lack of deaths in China compared with other countries provided all the evidence he needed:

“I think [the measures] are necessary, so can we guarantee everyone’s safety, our national safety. So we can effectively control the pandemic. ... That’s why we proactively comply. ... If you lose your life, what’s the point of freedom?”

4.1.2. Fear of financial ruin

Unlike in settings like the U.S., where COVID-19 control measures were seen as being at odds with financial wellbeing, during the first two years of the pandemic financial concerns bolstered most of our interviewees’ commitments to strict control measures.

Wendy, a financial analyst at a state-owned enterprise (SOE) in her late 20s explained in July 2020:

“[My colleagues and I] were following the protocol so we can work, live well, and make money. They think that to do all this, they need to comply with the government, to have *dahuanjing* under control. Only then can they make money and do things.”

In her interview, Wendy was critical of certain preventive measures that affected her, such as an inability to access work sites during quarantines. But she insisted she would ultimately benefit financially from supporting control measures. She agreed with the government’s assessment that greater financial ruin would come later if strict control measures were not implemented now.

This rationale was shared even by those for whom COVID had already caused financial pain, as their hardships only reinforced beliefs that strong control measures were necessary to prevent further pain. Si, a 21-year-old bus company employee and part-time McDonald's server, lost most of her work in early 2020 due to pandemic controls. When Cai interviewed her in July 2020, she told him, "We all comply, because we all hope that the pandemic will be over soon, so we can resume a normal life. So many people lost a fortune (*kui sun*). Of course, the sooner the pandemic is over, the better."

Si told us that she had no complaints regarding the state's control measures; her financial hardships, she said, were due to the pandemic itself. Indeed, Si and others told us, the control measures were accelerating the economic recovery – and thus improving *dahuanjing*. Improvements to *dahuanjing*, according to Si, would eventually benefit *laobaixing* like her. Media accounts of the gulf between the rapid control of COVID in China, and failures to do the same elsewhere in the world, further strengthened Si's sense that the Chinese government's actions must be necessary. Si said she was grateful for China's "correct" leadership when compared with "wrong" leadership in the U.S., where, as she put it, people were given the dubious freedom to make poor decisions that hurt themselves. "Americans, they might feel like if they wear masks, they will feel uncomfortable? I don't know how to explain this," she said with bewilderment.

4.2. Conscious indifference to transparency

Yinshan: It's not about credibility. I trust [the leaders] whether they are credible or not.

Cai: You don't care much whether the information is true?

Yinshan: No, I don't. Listen, does it matter if we care about truth? We are laobaixing, it's not our job to care. This is vague and lofty. What's important is that we are well-fed ... For laobaixing, anything else is empty talk.

In a 2016 article, Mason differentiates "true" (*zhenshi*) from "correct" (*zhengque*) public health data in China (Mason, 2016b, p. 49; see also, Blum, 2007). While "true" denotes accuracy, "correct" signifies "political correctness" (*zhengzhi zhengque*). The data reported from local- to higher-level public health officials were "correct" but were not necessarily "true." Subsequent policies were based on insiders' commonsensical understandings of the data they received. The system worked because no one mistakenly believed that "correct" data were "true," and because officials made mental adjustments to the data they received before acting on them.

Building on this distinction between "true" and "correct" data shared among officials, we observed a similar mechanism at play in the sharing of COVID-19 data between officials and *laobaixing*. As Yinshan explained, *laobaixing* were not naïve about the nature of the data they were provided. Far from being "brainwashed" (Wu, 2017) – as is often portrayed in Western media (Ge, 2012; Thokmay, 2019) – our interlocutors displayed what we call "conscious indifference to transparency." They were keenly aware that COVID statistics reported in the media were likely poor approximations of the "truth". Yet this was not of concern to them. As long as *dahuanjing* remained stable and they were able to stay healthy and safe, the accuracy of statistical data was beside the point.

CY, a 30-year-old entrepreneur, explained:

CY: Are 100,000 new cases different from 50,000? Does it really matter to you? Either way, you'll have to comply with preventive measures to protect yourself. As for how accurate the statistics are, I don't think that's important. It shouldn't influence your behavior.

Cai: Why isn't it important that statistics are 100% accurate?

CY: Because ... they're never 100% accurate. Some people might get sick and recover quickly and were never counted. [Whether] 50,000, 50,100, or 51,000, it doesn't impact your individual interests at all ... Sometimes the state reports a smaller number not because they are

trying to hide anything, but because some of the cases weren't confirmed yet.

Plus, sometimes you just must learn to interpret state-reported data. Data sharing is a craft. ... Take the Wuhan situation early on ... True, the situation might be awful. But what do you expect the government to say? To admit that, "yes, our hospital system collapsed and ran out of places to hospitalize patients?" For what? To produce more panic? We both know the state should not and could not have said anything like that. At a time when we already face disaster, would you really choose to publicize negative news?

For CY, there were three reasons full transparency should not be a goal. First, whether the data were "true" or "correct" did not change the overall state of *dahuanjing*. As long as people understood the situation was serious, the exact number of cases should not impact anyone's actions. Second, CY provided a rationale for the impracticality of achieving total accuracy in data reporting during a rapidly evolving outbreak. Finally, he argued that officials were wise to withhold certain information, because revealing the full scale of devastation would cause panic. Concerns about avoiding "chaos" (*luan*) and panic have long been reasons that Chinese officials provide for withholding sensitive information (Mason, 2016b; Spire, 2011). What CY's comments illustrate is how much this rationale made sense to many *laobaixing*. Those we interviewed did not trust fellow citizens to remain calm in the face of bad news any more than government officials did. But they *did* trust their government to ensure the stability of *dahuanjing*. To protect this stability – and thus, ultimately, themselves – government officials and citizens alike both agreed that it was better that *laobaixing* not know the full "truth" when it came to disease statistics.

Xia, a 57-year-old retired hospitality worker, told us:

"I always believe in the government because they are the authority. The authority has social responsibility for the news and data it releases and puts a lot of thought behind it. People on social media are free to say whatever they want because they don't have to be responsible for society. As for whether it's 100% accurate and whatnot, you can make your own judgment. But the most important things are the policies and directions."

Xia's comments highlight another reason our interviewees found total transparency to be unnecessary and undesirable: just because data were "true" did not mean they were good. For Xia, sharing the full truth about what happened in Wuhan was irresponsible and potentially harmful (Cai, 2020). Government-generated data might not technically be true, but our interlocutors suggested they were the product of thoughtful decisions made in the interest of responsibly promoting a healthy and stable *dahuanjing*. Information produced by others for posting on social media, on the other hand, might be neither "true" nor responsible.

Such comments mirrored language frequently used in government statements claiming that national development strategies were beyond *laobaixing's* ability to understand. The underlying implication was clear: trust us, we have your best interests at heart. For our interlocutors, this message was not empty propaganda. During the first two years of the pandemic, it was supported by considerable evidence: *dahuanjing* remained stable and their personal safety had been maintained. With this lived experience in hand, our interlocutors overwhelmingly expressed confidence that the state did have *laobaixing's* best interests at heart (Li, 2022). As such, they saw no need to seek out statistical truths.

4.3. Nationalistic pride

"Whatever [the state] says is whatever we will follow. We won't make mistakes by following them. We won't go in the wrong direction (*cuo fangxiang*)."

–Yinshan, age 50+, SOE employee.

4.3.1. Responsibility to nation

Even as they cited self-interest as the primary motivating factor for their own actions, interviewees also ascribed the willingness of *laobaixing* to support their government to a sense of responsibility and collective consciousness rooted in Chinese history and culture (Mason, 2020). Nationalistic rhetoric common on social media during this time similarly reflected the entanglement of these two dynamics.

The slogan “don’t cause more trouble to our nation” (*bugei guojia tianluan*) is a case in point. It emerged on social media in January 2020, quickly making its way into the repertoire of everyday expressions. Our interviewees repeated this slogan in describing why everyone should follow government instructions during COVID. Despite its collectivist connotations, “don’t cause more trouble to our nation” also was a sentiment steeped in personal interests. As Yu, a college student interviewed in 2020, explained: “We paid a lot to achieve this pandemic control success. If many people cause trouble, we will waste all the effort and sacrifices.” Yu wanted *laobaixing* to continue to cooperate at least in part so he could reap the benefits of what he had already invested.

Social opprobrium for the non-compliant was swift and public. In the first half of 2020, social media was filled with videos of noncompliant individuals being reprimanded by police officers, security guards, and neighborhood committee members. They were shown being scolded and even handcuffed for not wearing masks or for refusing to stay indoors (see Fig. 2). In the comments section of videos, people left comments



Fig. 2. A video widely circulated on WeChat in February 2020 of an elderly man who refused to wear a mask being arrested and pushed to the ground by police.

such as “Punish them hard” or “Arrest them and lock them up.” Among our interviewees there was little pushback against this stigmatizing approach.

As prolonged lockdowns returned to Shanghai in spring 2022, support for those resisting control measures began to increase on social media and in everyday life. Still, even in the face of prolonged quarantine and uneven and unstable distribution of food and other supplies, impatience with the noncompliant persisted among some of our Shanghai-based interviewees. In an interview in April 2022, Nick, a 40-year-old online business owner in Shanghai, harshly criticized non-compliant individuals: “It’s always these lice [those disobeying] causing trouble. When the government sends them to isolation centers, they scream like a pig being slaughtered and complain on social media. If the government doesn’t send them to quarantine, they are whining again, saying that the government leaves them to fend for themselves. These lice are selfish troublemakers.”

The nationalistic impulses and public shaming that accompanied China’s COVID response in the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic clearly resonate with longstanding traditions of political mass mobilization that reach back to the era of Mao Zedong and beyond (Liu, 2006; Lu, 2015; Mason, 2016a). During the Great Leap Forward (1958–62) and Cultural Revolution (1966–76), hundreds of millions answered calls for collective action to build a Communist utopia (Song, 2014; Walder and Andrew, 2019). They complied with government demands to attend rallies, undertake manual labor, and participate in performative shaming – sacrificing things like personal wealth, family ties, and religious traditions in the process. These movements led to political upheaval, violence, and even mass starvation (Su, 2011; Yang, 2016).

The sense of obligation to country, communitarian participation in collective responses to national challenges, and willingness to publicly punish those who exhibited inadequate enthusiasm for these efforts all have precedents in earlier periods (He, 2007; Lu, 2015). However, while avoiding political peril continues to motivate, and following orders “from above” remains an embodied habit, our data suggest that for most people, the synergy between state messaging and popular actions during COVID-19 came from different priorities, and were understood to lead to different ends, than they did in the past.

Half a century ago, “the people” (*renmin*) equated morality with a willingness to “eat bitterness” (*chiku*). Commitment to collectivist actions were upheld despite individual sacrifices and material deprivation, in service of a future utopia (Manning and Wemheuer, 2011). In contrast, mass compliance with COVID-19 efforts grew out of a different sort of nationalistic fervor. In response to government calls to work together to contain COVID-19, today’s *laobaixing* complied to protect their personal health and wealth. Rather than its promise in building a Communist utopia, our interlocutors celebrated their nation’s achievements in preserving the functioning of the market economy. Their continued cooperation also was dependent upon constant evaluations of how well the state performed its obligation to protect them.

Xiaoman, a student, explained in an interview:

“During the wartime led by Chairman Mao, we formed a habit to follow orders from above. Only by following orders could we win battles and defeat our enemies. Back then, *laobaixing* were impoverished and poorly educated. They believed Chairman Mao could give them a better life so they were willing to follow him, to fight. For my generation, the most important reason is that following orders leads to beneficial outcomes.”

4.3.2. Deflected blame

Any analysis of COVID-related Chinese nationalism must account for the brief period of popular discontent that emerged during the first months of the pandemic and exploded following the death of Li Wenliang, a physician at Wuhan Central Hospital. In December 2019, Li, along with several colleagues, sent a message to friends on WeChat, warning of a SARS-like disease at his hospital. Li was detained by

authorities and made to deny his claims. Infections quickly increased and spread to other parts of China as the Chinese New Year approached. Anger erupted on social media as citizens demanded to know what was happening in Wuhan and why Li's claims had not been taken seriously. The unrest culminated in Li's death from COVID-19 on February 7, 2020. Li's mask-wearing image became the symbol of *laobaixing* calling for justice for all those dying from perceived government coverup and inaction (Fig. 3).

The crisis of trust in government that Li's death unleashed did not last. By the time COVID began spreading widely in the rest of the world, anger had dissipated and was replaced with nationalistic pride. Indeed, according to surveys on trust in government conducted in March 2020 in over 170 countries, China's government ranked among the "most trusted" by its citizens (Fetzer et al., 2020) (quoted in Rieger and Wang, 2022, p. 977). Likewise, according to the 2021 Democracy Perception Index Report (DeVeaux and Döhlitzsch, 2020), China ranked second on citizens' trust in governmental responses to COVID (the U.S. ranked 42nd) (Rieger and Wang, 2022, p. 978). Analysis of social media materials suggests that a multi-pronged deflection of blame made this trust possible.

First, blame for missteps in the country's COVID response was redirected from the central government to local officials. This is an established tactic of the central Chinese government, which often seeks to distinguish a caring, trust-worthy central government from incompetent, corrupt local governments (Chen, 2017; Su et al., 2016). The central government declared Li a "national martyr" (XinhuaNews, 2020) and punished local officials who mistreated him (BJNews, 2020). These moves – which came alongside the rapid containment of COVID inside China – were enough to tamp down most criticism, at least in urban areas.

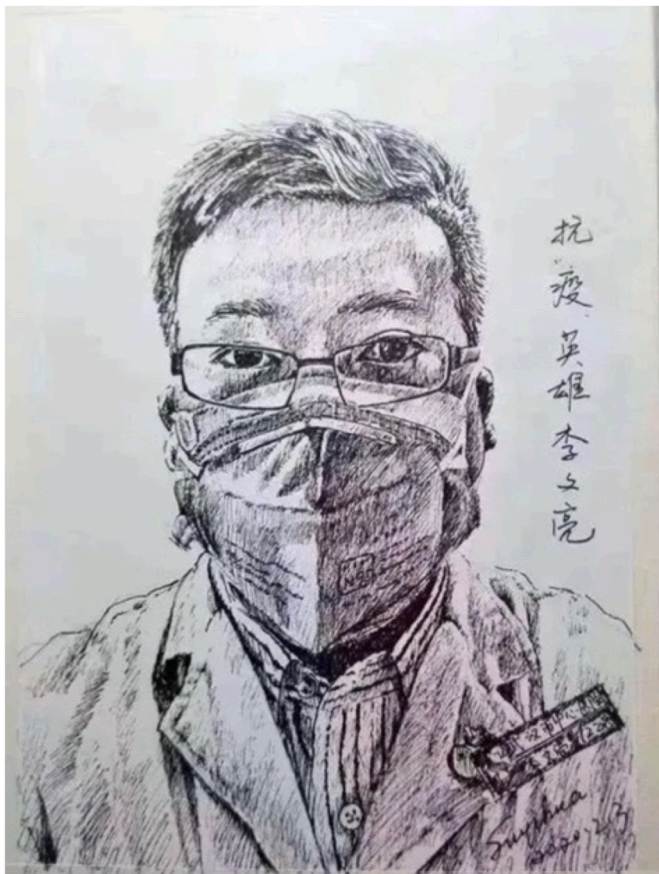


Fig. 3. This drawing circulated online after Li died from COVID-19. The caption: "An Anti-Pandemic Hero, Dr. Li Wenliang."

Punitive measures against local officials continued throughout the pandemic. Every time a regional outbreak took place, or a local response was bungled, local officials were removed from their positions to set examples for others and reassure the public that action was being taken. These performative measures redirected discontent onto local officials. Local scandals reinforced support for the national government. Thus, while *laobaixing* critiqued local responses to COVID, those critiques rarely extended to the broader national response. For example, Chon, a 34-year-old manager of a garage, criticized local governments for enforcing unreasonable control measures in an interview in April 2022. But he emphasized that it wasn't the central government's fault: "The state has announced that local governments cannot do this. But local governments didn't obey," Chon told us.

By spring 2020, public sentiment also coalesced around the idea that COVID originated not in Wuhan but in Europe or the U.S. Social media rumors swirled with claims that SARS-CoV-2 was found in Spanish sewage systems in mid-2019 (Chavarria-Miró et al., 2020). Additional rumors suggested that the U.S. Army base Fort Detrick may have been responsible for releasing the virus (Zhang and Chen, 2021), and that U.S. military personnel brought the virus with them when participating in the 2019 Military World Games in Wuhan (CCYL, 2021, see Fig. 4). These reports suggested that, long before the Wuhan outbreak, the virus was spreading elsewhere in the world. By June 2020, most interviewees felt certain that COVID-19 originated outside of China.

Finally, media reports about COVID in other countries instilled an image of foreign governments – particularly the U.S. and U.K. – as incompetent and irresponsible in handling COVID (Su, 2022). Supporting the Chinese government was equated with protecting *dahuanjing* from the dangers created by untrustworthy Western governments, which allowed a deadly threat to spread unchecked (Mason, 2016a). Haiyang, a 58-year-old retiree, commented in July 2020: "[American] *laobaixing's* health is not the priority of the U.S. government. ... The pandemic is so serious and the whole world is trying to battle it. But they are talking about the election, about resuming work. The U.S. government never reflected on its liability in the spread of the virus."

In short, nationalistic sentiments, driven by trust in the central government to protect their interests in the face of misdeeds by foreign powers and local officials, buttressed *laobaixing's* willingness to comply with strict COVID-19 control measures in China for the first two years of the pandemic.

5. Discussion

Since the 1990s, anthropologists of China have been tracking what Yan Yunxiang calls the "individualization of Chinese society." Yan and others argue that a harsh strain of individualism emerged in both rural and urban areas in the wake of China's embrace of a market economy after the death of Chairman Mao in 1976 (Ong, 2006; Rofel, 2007; Yan, 2009). The rise of individualistic and capitalistic pursuits accelerated in the twenty-first century, leading some to call the current generation of Chinese young people the "want generation" (Fish, 2015).

In addition to the neoliberal belief that individuals were responsible for maintaining their own health (Hathaway, 2014; Miller, 2016), individualization emerged in our interviews through discussions of personal cost-benefit analysis. Beneath collective acts of compliance with strict pandemic control measures lay individuals calculating whether health and financial gains for themselves and their families outweighed the costs and sacrifices associated with compliance. Supporting the "collective" (*jitizhuyi*) was justified as necessary primarily because doing so ultimately accrued benefits for the self. While different people's precise reasons for complying with the state's demands differed, almost all our interviewees agreed that tangible results were what mattered. Trust and pride in the nation were based on a "job well-done" rather than on ideological rhetoric. Ren, a 52-year-old retiree, explained in an interview, "Foreign media always assume that what we *laobaixing* say are taught by the government. But this is simply



Fig. 4. A timeline of the supposed spread of COVID-19 from the 2019 Military World Games. The chronology suggests evidence of COVID-19 in the U.S., Italy, France, and Brazil before the outbreak in Wuhan. From an August 2021 Communist Youth League article: <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1707571587138941012&wfr=spider&for=pc>.

false. We *laobaixing* have deep lived experiences (*shenqie de ganshou*) of the government's actions."

Sleeboom-Faulkner (2011) argues that looking at the actions of Chinese people as emerging *either* from state rhetoric and power *or* from neoliberal subjectivity creates a false dichotomy and oversimplifies the

complexities of health decision-making in contemporary China (1803). The contemporary Chinese state continues to hold immense power, and most Chinese still usually comply with state requirements even when they don't want to (Hao, 2022), due to potential penal consequences (Zuo, 2022). The Chinese state also influences individuals' personal calculations through its messaging in increasingly diverse media and social media outlets – a governing style Ong and Zhang call "socialism from afar" (2008). The perspectives of *laobaixing* are thus always mediated by governmental goals and propaganda (Foucault, 1977). Fear of public shaming and subsequent consequences also play an important role in shaping public opinion and actions (Zhao and Burgess, 2021).

In arguing that our interlocutors are making thoughtful decisions about whether to *willingly* support state control measures, we thus do not suggest that their choices are limitless or that they are making purely rational decisions unmediated by outside influences. Like citizens of any country, Chinese are heavily influenced by the information they access, and are constrained by the laws of the land where they live and the consequences for violating them. Still, they make reasoned decisions based on the information they have. When that information changes, their perspectives change too.

6. Conclusion

In summer 2021, when COVID appeared to be coming under control in countries with looser regulations, some *laobaixing* began publicly discussing whether it was time China loosened its controls and learned to "co-exist with the virus" (*yu bingdu gongcun*) (Zhang, 2021). During the Omicron BA.2 outbreak in Shanghai in spring 2022, public discontent with strict, poorly executed control measures surged (Economist, 2022). Indeed, the Shanghai lockdown of Spring 2022 – which began in March 2022 and only gradually loosened up by June 2022 – triggered the strongest resistance to pandemic control measures among Shanghai residents since the pandemic began in 2020 (Hao, 2022). When food, access to medical care, income, and personal life were put into jeopardy for a prolonged period, doubts, frustration, and exhaustion started to replace the previous overwhelming support for the government.

Wendy, the financial analyst who strongly supported government policies in our initial interviews, completely changed her attitude when Cai interviewed her again in March 2022: "Is it still necessary to insist on the zero-Covid policy? Our country is almost cut off from the external world. It's like two high-speed trains, but we are going in different directions ... This is disconcerting. We are burying our head in the sand." Chon, the manager at a state-owned garage, concluded in April 2022, "At this point, the gains of strict pandemic control for three years on end are less than the loss." Actively monitoring *dahuanjing*, commentators like Wendy and Chon critically weighed the necessity of pandemic control against its impact on their personal livelihoods and found it to be lacking.

Even prior to recent lockdowns, willing compliance was not uniform across China. Chinese social scientists studying pandemic experiences in rural China found stronger resistance to strict control measures among rural residents than what we found in Shanghai or on social media (Jing and He, 2020; Ye, 2021). And our interviewees were not always happy with measures that negatively affected their finances or restricted their ability to travel.

Nevertheless, in the first two years of the pandemic, our interlocutors overwhelmingly believed that complying with state directives would benefit themselves, their families, and their country. The nationalistic sentiments our interlocutors espoused can be understood both as sincere expressions of pride in their nation's response to a global crisis, and as practiced rhetorical techniques, steeped in a long history of sloganeering, and reinforced through long hours of consuming contemporary media. Just because they were echoing government messages, however, did not mean our interlocutors did not mean what they said – nor did it mean that they did not think about why they were saying it. China's COVID successes depended on thoughtful decisions on the part of

Chinese citizens to actively support what they thought was the best course of action for their country and themselves.

While China's authoritarian government played a role in achieving this result, it did not – at least in the first two years of the pandemic – do so primarily through coercion. Instead, it controlled the narrative about COVID-19 and supported that narrative with effective actions. That it was able to do this largely without resistance for more than two years speaks to many Chinese citizens' trust in, and satisfaction with, the central government's ability to promote a healthy *dahuanjing* and ultimately to protect themselves and their families. The deaths of millions of people around the world served as a powerful warning of what could happen to individuals if collective control of COVID-19 was not achieved.

Our study provides new insights into the relationship between compliance and data. Previous studies have suggested that the more information is made accessible, the more likely the public is to be willing to take collective measures to protect health (Miller et al., 2021). Our findings suggest otherwise. Despite the unreliable nature of data provided to the public, most urban Chinese willingly complied with the state's strict control measures. They did this because they trusted that the state was acting based on the knowledge it had, that it was using this knowledge to protect *dahuanjing*, and that a healthy *dahuanjing* would protect the personal health and safety of themselves as *laobaixing*. Under these circumstances, "true" data was beside the point. They did not need to know everything the government knew to trust in the path set for them.

Key to this trust was the observation that the control measures being implemented were compatible with their own individual interests. If this compatibility changes meaningfully over time – as recent events suggest it might – we expect the attitudes of *laobaixing* will change too. This bodes ill for the future of China's zero-COVID policy. While fear of punishment may well force China's population into compliance for a time, in the long term an unwilling populace will likely be much harder to control than a willing one.

Our findings have policy implications that go beyond China. While we certainly do not suggest that governments release inaccurate data or blame their missteps on others, we do suggest there are useful lessons to be learned from the Chinese experience. When public health officials provide clear, easy to follow directions from sources the public trusts; when they rally nationalistic pride; and when they tie public health actions closely to the personal interests of individuals, mass compliance with even the strictest control measures is possible. While authoritarian power and the threat of punishment likely played a role in China's successes, this dynamic may not be necessary when other components are in place. Few of our interlocutors mentioned fear of the authorities as a major motivating factor. Instead, they complied because the evidence before them suggested it was in their interest to do so, and because they had something sorely lacking in many Western contexts: trust in the competence and good intentions of their national government.

Credit author statement

Yifeng Troy Cai: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data Curation, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review and Editing, Visualization, Project Administration, Funding Acquisition, **Katherine A. Mason:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review and Editing, Visualization, Supervision, Project Administration, Funding Acquisition, **Social Science & Medicine manuscript number:** SSM-D-22-00522R1, Article Title: Why They Willingly Complied: Ordinary People, the Big Environment, and the Control of COVID-19 in China.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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